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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000454

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10 YEARS

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [ES](#)

SUBJECT: SALVADORAN POLICE SHIFT STRATEGY AGAINST DRUG
PUSHERS

REF: SAN SALVADOR 00418

Classified By: CDA Michael Butler for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1. (C) On February 18, elements of the Salvadoran Anti-Narcotics police arrested 155 low-level drug dealers for trafficking in narcotics. This raid occurred as part of a larger operation designated Plan Hawk (Halcon), which has netted 426 drug dealers in the last six weeks. Normally, ninety percent of individuals arrested in large raids are ordered released by the judiciary due to technical failings. In this most recent raid, however, 147 of the 155 individuals arrested were ordered held over for trial. This means that they will be incarcerated -- and off the streets -- for at least six months until their trial. Avila told emboffs that he channeled the arrested drug dealers to a friendly first instance judge, to avoid having a crooked or ineffective judge release the dealers.

2. (C) Plan Hawk is part of an overall GOES strategy to target street crimes -- such as drug dealing, extortion, and petty theft -- that are the bread and butter of Salvadoran gangs. Police Director Rodrigo Avila, who is under heavy public pressure to address the crime situation (Reftel), told emboffs to expect additional large scale operations against gang-controlled criminal activity. More importantly, he indicated that he will continue to work closely with the Attorney General's office, thereby reducing the "technical failings" that have previously prompted the immediate release of arrested gang members by first instance judges.

3. (C) Comment: Since his appointment as National Police Commissioner, Avila has undertaken a complete shake-up of the police, and has had corrupt cops arrested and inefficient ones transferred. Avila told Polcouns late last week that he had no idea he was inheriting such a demoralized and ineffective police force, but that he was going to fix it from the top down. Avila's recent, aggressive raids against "mara" extortionists and the retail drug industry in San Salvador and other cities is an indication that he will tackle El Salvador's out-of-control crime situation, regardless of the impediments. Whether judges cooperate and keep criminals in jail is a different story.
Butler